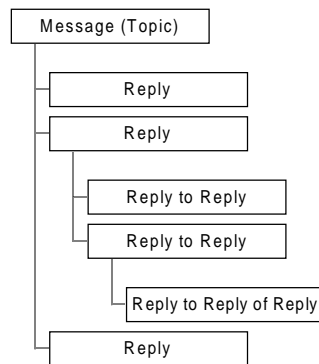# iMSRR Newsgroup Reasoning

by Peter Valentine

10/18/95

The iMSRR uses newsgroups for bulletin board style discussion groups... Some of the reasons for using newsgroups over reflectors are as follows
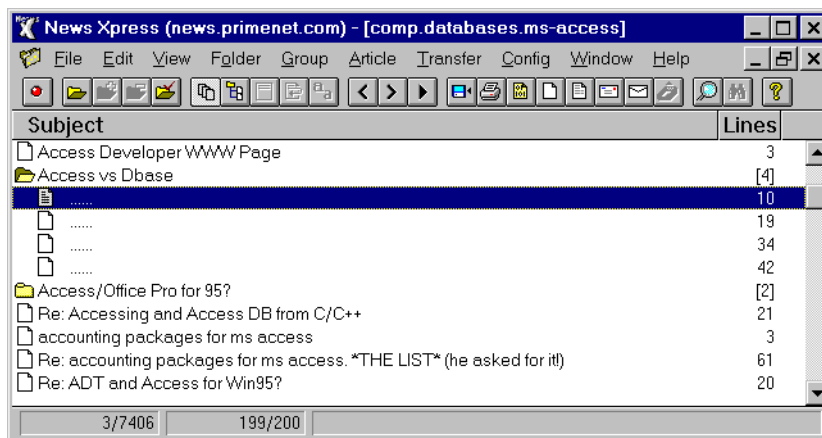
Threaded messaging & Topics

A newsgroup keeps track of a "thread" of an electronic conversation by archiving not only the original message that was posted, but also all of its responses. The resulting heirarchy of a message and its replies is known as a topic.

```
           ┌─────────────────────┐
           │   Message (Topic)    │
           └─────────────────────┘
              │
              │   ┌─────────────────────┐
              ├───│        Reply         │
              │   └─────────────────────┘
              │   ┌─────────────────────┐
              ├───│        Reply         │
              │   └─────────────────────┘
              │      │  ┌─────────────────────┐
              │      ├──│    Reply to Reply    │
              │      │  └─────────────────────┘
              │      │  ┌─────────────────────┐
              │      ├──│    Reply to Reply    │
              │      │  └─────────────────────┘
              │      │    │  ┌──────────────────────────┐
              │      │    └──│  Reply to Reply of Reply   │
              │      │       └──────────────────────────┘
              │   ┌─────────────────────┐
              └───│        Reply         │
                  └─────────────────────┘
```
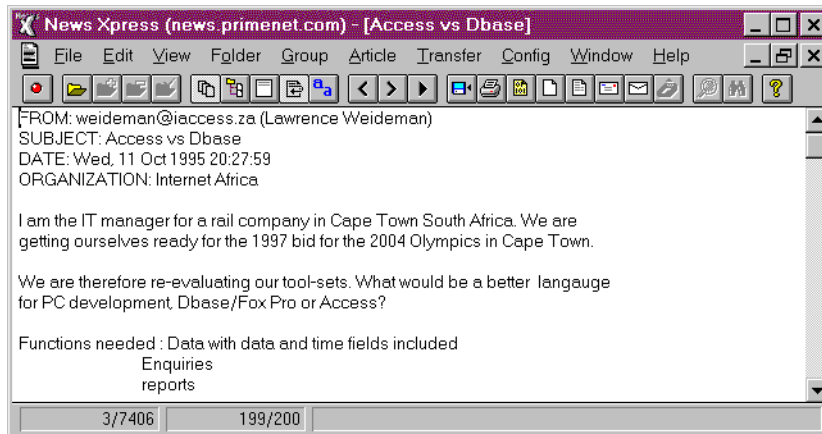
Topics in news groups are a naturally related group of messages which can be quickly ignored if the subject of the initial message was not of interest. This results in a very efficient way of scanning a newsgroup for topics of interest, while ignoring others.

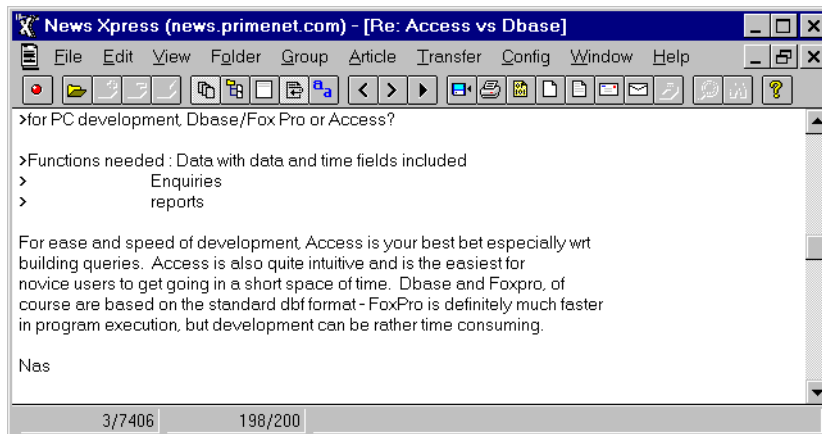The following set of screens are an example of the use of a newsreader to read a topic:

The list of all current topics is displayed in the main window, topics with one or more responses are shown with a 📁 folder icon. The user of the newsreader can browse through the Subjects of the individual topics looking for interesting items, or responses to their previous posts.

In the example above the "Access vs Dbase" topic has been expanded to show four individual messages within the thread. By selecting the first message we can bring up the original message which started the thread:

```
News Xpress (news.primenet.com) – [Access vs Dbase]          _ □ ×
  File  Edit  View  Folder  Group  Article  Transfer  Config  Window  Help      _ ⊟ ×

FROM: weideman@iaccess.za (Lawrence Weideman)
SUBJECT: Access vs Dbase
DATE: Wed, 11 Oct 1995 20:27:59
ORGANIZATION: Internet Africa

I am the IT manager for a rail company in Cape Town South Africa. We are
getting ourselves ready for the 1997 bid for the 2004 Olympics in Cape Town.

We are therefore re-evaluating our tool-sets. What would be a better langauge
for PC development, Dbase/Fox Pro or Access?

Functions needed : Data with data and time fields included
                Enquiries
                reports

       3/7406            199/200
```

Then by following the thread to its replies we can read the what the responses to his query were:

```
News Xpress (news.primenet.com) – [Re: Access vs Dbase]       _ □ ×
  File  Edit  View  Folder  Group  Article  Transfer  Config  Window  Help      _ ⊟ ×

>for PC development, Dbase/Fox Pro or Access?

>Functions needed : Data with data and time fields included
>                Enquiries
>                reports

For ease and speed of development, Access is your best bet especially wrt
building queries. Access is also quite intuitive and is the easiest for
novice users to get going in a short space of time. Dbase and Foxpro, of
course are based on the standard dbf format - FoxPro is definitely much faster
in program execution, but development can be rather time consuming.

Nas

       3/7406            198/200
```

In this fashion the reader can quickly find the topics they want to read, and then download and read them. The advantage of topics is that it provides users with the ability to filter through, read the main topics and then simply ignore the responses to topics they don't care about.

Information "Pull" vs "Push"

Traditional Electronic Mail (E-Mail) operates a "push" approach where the message is "pushed" across the network into the users personal e-mail box. Newsgroups on the other hand, store the messages in a central repository, and newsgroup readers permit the user to browse through topics selecting the messages they want to read and "pulling" only those messages they are interested in.

As mentioned previously, users of a newsgroup only download the messages they are interested in. By *not* downloading uninteresting messages, a great deal of networking bandwidth can be saved. While the network bandwidth requirements of a "few" ignored messages by a single user does not seem very large, when you mulitply that by thousands of users, it becomes very significant.

In addition, to network bandwidth considerations, there is also the issue of information overload. A more primative, alternative approach to newsgroups is the E-Mail Reflector. The E-Mail Reflector operates on the principal that users subscribe to a reflector group, which then re-mails all e-mail sent to a certain e-mail address to all users of the group. E-Mail reflectors are notorious for "clogging-up" e-mail boxes with hundreds of messages which the subscriber doesn't care about and simply deletes. It is not unusual after subscribing to a few popular reflector's to received upwards of 50 to 100 e-mail messages a day. Reflector e-mail messages are also not neatly organized into topic threads, rather they simply appear in order of transmission, almost requiring that each message be read before deleting the unimportant ones.

Information Archive

Another very valuable aspect of Newsgroups is their ability to archive the topic threads. Because all messages are stored in a central News Server, the News Server can be configured to act as an archive of all of the topics. This has several benefits.

First, the users of a newsgroup can always back-up and read the earlier messages in a thread, long after they would have normally deleted the message from their private e-mail box.

Second, with a continuous archive of the topic threads, new users can back and read earlier messages of a current thread, something that simply cannot be done with e-mail. This is a very powerful concept, permitting people to "discover" a topic thread that may have been going on for several weeks, read back along the thread to understand what has already been discussed and then to intelligently join the conversation. This approach is in sharp contrast to e-mail reflector groups where new members in a discussion are asking the same basic questions over an over again driving many of the veterans of the discussion to distraction.

Third, because the News server stores the messages centrally on the Internet, it can be accessed from any point in the world relatively easily, which cannot be said for many e-mail systems, and because all messages are archived, one can always retrieve old messages for review and dicussion while TDY.

Finally, the News Server provides an audit trail for all of its messages as each message is time and date stamped upon receipt, it is possible to retrieve when certain tasking messages were sent and when their responses were received, etc. This can prove to be an invaluable management tool, clearly documenting the flow and change of ideas on projects, and providing backup documentation on when certain taskings were put into place.